





A Preface To  
"Northanger Abbey."

By  
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## A Preface to Northanger Abbey.

There is a circumstance connected with the publication of "Northanger Abbey" which is among the most conspicuous additions of literary history. Jane Austen wrote the first version of this book by 1798, when she was but twenty-three years of age, and kept it by her for five years, by which time she had brought it to the state in which we see it now. Very shortly afterwards it was bought by a bookseller, and was even announced as



a forthcoming publication. But he never published it; and thirteen years later he sold it back to Jane Austen's brother Henry for exactly the ten pounds he paid for it, and no more.

Now, we must all agree with Mrs Austen herself when she remarks "that any bookseller should think it worth while to purchase what he did not think worth while to publishing seems extraordinary." It can only be explained by supposing that he was unfortunate enough to be forced by his calling into



giving expression in hard cash to an attitude common enough among the readers of Jane Austen. He picked up the manuscript from his ~~letter~~<sup>post</sup>-bag, opened it as if it were any other, and formed the opinion that it very nearly was. It was a pleasant tale about pleasant people, written in simple English; and it had the further advantage, ~~that~~<sup>from</sup> the point of view of the circulating libraries, that it was plainly written by a lady who wrote from her own knowledge of life as it was lived in country seats and at Bath, with



all confidence. therefore, he bade the counting-house send ten pounds to the author.

But later, perhaps when he was about to send the manuscript down to the printing-press, he gave it another look, and was sharply pulled up by a suspicion that it was not what he had supposed it. He was not at all sure that the tale was as <sup>or so</sup> like any other as he had supposed. <sup>pleasant</sup> It certainly was not the kind of tale generally accepted as pleasant at the circulating libraries, which draws tears and smiles



from the reader by incidents generally accepted as having that effect. For though the people in it were pleasant enough, the author's attitude to them was not so pleasant. It was disconcerting. One did not know where one was. She seemed to be laughing at them for actions not usually considered laughable. It might even be feared that she was laughing at the reader; in which case she would certainly be laughing much louder at the business man whom she had persuaded to act as intermediary in this sarcastic



assault on the public. But it might even  
be that the joke the manuscript was  
playing on him was even more impudent.  
It might be that there was nothing in  
it at all, innocuous swaddle which  
would strike even the circulating libraries  
as insipid trifling with their subscribers'  
intelligence; for it dealt with most ordinary  
people and events, and that not robustly,  
as Fielding and Smollett had done  
it, nor with sentimental excitement  
as Richardson and Fanny Burney had  
done it, but with the calm of  
ladies talking round a tea table. It  
is not to be wondered if the book.



seller threw back into his bureau drawer this manuscript. That either meant far too much or far too little, told the printer's devil not to wait, and announced to himself that he might as well consider that ten pounds as good as lost.

It is worth while remembering this poor man's flight, because it draws attention to a quality in Jane Austen's work which might escape our notice: and that is its morosity. It has often been remarked that nowhere in her novels is there any mention of the Napoleonic wars that were ravaging Europe during the whole of her adult



life; and though all that ~~might~~<sup>can</sup> legitimately be deduced from this omission is that she knew she had nothing to say about the Napoleonic wars, an attempt has been made to use it as a proof that she was an entirely instinctual and personal artist, who drew little of her power from intellectual apprehension of the world around her. But this is unjustifiable. Turn to "Evelina," written twenty years before "Northanger Abbey," and still so generally regarded as the standard woman's novel that Jane Austen described one of her books to a publisher as being "the same length as 'Evelina,'" and the contrast



between the two books will make one wonder if Jane Austen had not been greatly though indirectly influenced by the sceptical movement of the eighteenth century which came to a climax in the French Revolution.

The indirectness must be emphasised. Mrs Austen ~~would~~ certainly have thought ~~that~~ Helen Maria Williams a sad goose for going to France to witness the dawn of liberty and stopping nearly long enough to get her head chopped off. But it is surely not a coincidence that a country gentlewoman should sit down and put the institutions of society regarding women through the most quelling



criticism they have ever received, just at the time ~~that~~ <sup>when</sup> Europe was generally following Voltaire and Rousseau in their opinion that social institutions not only should but could be questioned.

For the feminism of Jane Austen, to take the expression of it in "Northanger Abbey," was very marked. It was, I think, quite conscious; the odd attack on the Spectator at the end of Chapter Five must have been evoked by the slighting references to women common in that work. And it is very drastic; it declares that the position of woman as society dictated it was humiliating, dangerous, and founded on lying propositions. She draws us poor Catherine



Morland, a good creature if even there was  
one, of whom we would read with pleasure  
even if we did not know that when Jane  
<sup>describes</sup> ~~reads~~ her life as one of a <sup>country</sup> parson's  
brood of ten she ~~is~~ <sup>is writing</sup> ~~reveling~~ of something  
very near her own life as one of a  
country parson's brood of eight. She  
shows us how the good creature was  
flattered by the romantic conception of  
love and womanhood. Everywhere it  
was pretended that women were heroines,  
that men worshipped them and strove  
for their possession, either in the decent way  
that led to the altar, or by abduction  
and seduction, and that in any case it  
was disinterested desire which dictated  
the relationship of the sexes. So these



illusions Jane Austen ~~opposes~~ the truth  
in her bitter invention of General Gilbey's  
mercenary pursuit of Catherine and his  
unmannerly dismissal of her. There, it  
seems, other forces operating ~~besides~~ the  
one commonly named. You give women  
the incomparable protection and consequence  
of matrimony, but they are not above  
considering if there may not be a  
quid pro quo in the transaction. In  
fact, a wife with a dowry is better  
than none; and this dowry must be  
in gold, for, as it is pointed out in  
this volume on several pages, wealth  
of the mind counts in the female sex  
as a kind of poverty.



These facts shatter the conception of romantic love, and provoke among the less admirable sort of woman a counter-calculation. It is interesting to note the reality and novelty of Isabella Thorpe. Men and women writers had often drawn the coquettes before, but, since they all wrote from the masculinist point of view, it was always assumed that their motive was psychological. It was to conquer men that the coquette was supposed to chop and change; but Mrs Austen nervously though scornfully suggests that it was to gain as good an establishment as possible. But the <sup>every sensible woman had to</sup> tragedy is that <sup>admit</sup> that there was a lot to be said for Isabella Thorpe's aims and artifice, since



There was no way of independence for women and the pleasantest way of dependence was matrimony. Husband-hunting was shameful and horrid, but there was every reason why one should join in the hunt.

There were two reasons why Jane Austen felt acutely on this subject. The first was the urgency of her own need for an establishment. Her financial position was always insecure. When her father died she and her mother and her sister were left in straitened circumstances, and so level a head must have foreseen this. In David Rhydderch, in his interesting "Jane Austen, her



life and art," points out how these financial troubles are mirrored in the later novels. She must, therefore, have sometimes wished she could have been as much less than herself as wants have permitted her to take a hand in the game. But there was also a force more powerful than these material considerations which made her discontented with the common attitude to love.

She ~~possessed~~ <sup>was fully</sup> possessed of the idealism which is a necessary ingredient of the great satirist. If she criticised the institutions of earth it was because she had a very <sup>definite ideas regarding</sup> ~~clear conception of~~ the institutions of heaven. There is a



beautiful and pathetic self-revelation in all the passages dealing with Catherine and Henry Tilney. Again and again Mrs Austen makes Catherine "give herself away," as in the scene where she bursts breathless and apologetic into the Tilneys' lodgings after John Thorpe has delivered his impertinent message to Eleanor; an enemy could be very mocking about her at such times. But ~~Henry~~ Henry never goes over to the side of the enemy, he is always loyal and understanding of the stress that has compelled her to be a little foolish. It is apparent that though Jane Austen did not want to



scheme for an establishment nor to afe  
inbeility, she would have liked to have  
an eternal friend and supporter. From  
her drawing of Catherine Morland one  
knows that she would have been able  
to pay the price of such a benefit,  
and herself ~~beant~~ have returned eternal  
friendship and support.

It is characteristic of Jane Austen's  
art that she presents this story,  
which was the fruit of strong feeling  
and audacious thought, with such  
perfect serenity that one accepts it as  
a beautiful established fact. There  
are those who have doubted whether



"Northanger Abbey" is worthy to stand beside "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sense and Sensibility"; and it is at a disadvantage compared with these because it is the least happily proportioned of all Mrs Austen's works. The satire on Mr Radcliffe and "The Mysteries of Udolpho", though delightful in itself, is not quite satisfactorily fused with the more important matter of the story. But this matters little in view of the many delights to be found in this book. It is sharp with Jane Austen's hate of unpleasant



Things, it is sweet with her love of  
all that is pleasant, it nourishes  
with ~~her~~<sup>special</sup> wit that is the extremity  
of good sense; and her genius for  
character-drawing is at its happiest  
here. Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland  
are not in the least insipid because  
of their blameworthiness; on the contrary,  
they are such with the special  
charm that attends the conjunction  
of good sense and good breeding.  
The less admirable characters are as  
enjoyable, and among them is John



Thorpe especially deserves note as a superb analysis of vulgarity and its perpetual expenditure of force to no purpose. The book contains, moreover, a wealth of those phrases which, brief and simple in themselves, evoke a whole phase of existence. On a hundredth reading Mr. Morland's gentle rebuke, "I did not quite like, at breakfast, to hear you talk so much about the French bread at Northanger," will bring home to one the unanalysable quality



of maternal concern which is most  
laughed at and most missed; just  
as Catherine's "first view of that  
well-known spire which would announce  
her within twenty miles of home"  
always brings to the mind's eye and  
the heart's recollection whatever country-  
side is familiar to them. The book  
has, indeed, a full measure of that  
character which makes the death of  
Jane Austen at forty-one as ominous  
as the death of Mozart at a  
slightly earlier age; since it seems



to hint that too <sup>urgent a</sup> ~~ambition~~ thirst for  
perfection can only be quenched in  
the grave.

Rebecca West

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This fair copy is sent to  
Emanie Sachs with all the writer's  
love.

May 25<sup>th</sup>  
1932

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